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ABSTRACT

This paper recounts the experiences of two very different teacher educators in Hong Kong and their "attachment experiences" (professional teacher educators going back to get fresh experience teaching in primary school classrooms with the intention of returning to careers training teachers to be primary school language teachers). Their experiences are compared in terms of their preparation, classroom actions, and initial reflections. It is concluded that going back for a stint in the classroom was a useful and productive experience for both professional teacher educators, because it forced them to reevaluate some of their assumptions and beliefs and will inform their future training of teachers. This in turn will make them better teacher educators, thus making their students better teachers. It is suggested that any experience in the classroom is a good thing, but longer stints are likely to be more useful that short ones. (11 references.) (KFT)

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A Comparison of Two Types of School Attachment for Teacher Educators

He An E and Ann Heron

Abstract

Two teacher educators taught in primary schools as part of their professional development. They found that their previous roles in educational contexts had a profound effect on the ways in which they had experienced the attachment, and in their initial reflections on it. Their different perceptions led them to re-evaluate their experience. This paper reports and compares their experiences in terms of their preparation, their classroom actions, and their initial reflections. They argue that post-attachment professional discussion is necessary in order for professional development to take place in such a scheme.

1. Introduction

Teacher education is a life long experience of professional development. However, once a person becomes a teacher educator, she has little chance to become a school learner again, to go back to classroom – teaching. This is described as a "linear and fixed " process of professional development (Richert 1995:5). The school attachment scheme initiated by the Hong Kong Institute of Education aims to provide opportunities for the staff to go back to school and obtain 'recent and relevant' experience of classroom teaching in local primary schools. The scheme was initiated as part of the professional development of the staff in the Institute.

This paper compares two teacher educators' attachment experiences in school. The two educators share little in their training background and past working experience. One is a senior lecturer (Lecturer A in the following) with more than ten years' experience as a language educator, and years of experience teaching English in schools around the world. The other, a lecturer (Lecturer B), joined the Institute in recent years with training as a classroom researcher. They hold different beliefs and perceptions about teacher education and language teaching. Nevertheless, they have been working together cooperatively and collaboratively in classroom teaching and academic research. Both feel they benefit from this working relationship as they challenge each other's opinions and share ideas, and subsequently obtain a different perspective in looking at issues and problems. Although they entered upon the attachment in two different ways, based on their own training background

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and stages of professional development, both took attachment as a chance to reflect on their beliefs, and assumptions about teaching, learning, and teacher education; such reflection has been called for in the field of teacher education in recent years (e.g. Loughran and Northfield 1996, Myers 1997). Their experiences are compared and described in the following sections: 1) preparations for the attachment; 2) actions in the classroom; 3) implications and reflections. Their self-testimony about the experience in the schools is provided in parallel under each section. Comparisons are made to highlight the relation between types of attachment and teacher educators' needs during different stage of professional development.

2. Preparations for the Attachment

Because of their different background, the two educators had their own motives and needs for participating in the scheme. This, in turn, prescribed the role they decided to take during the attachment. Lecturer A's reflection revealed this:

> *On reflection, I see that I position myself still on the classroom teacher's side of the fence. I look back on my attachment from the point of view of an experienced schoolteacher. I have a postgraduate certificate in primary teaching, (as well as one in secondary teaching) and have conducted teaching practice supervision in Hong Kong primary and lower secondary schools since 1990. I have also taught in lower secondary schools in Asia, Malaysia and Brunei, where the lockstep systems are the same as those in Hong Kong primary and secondary schools··· I set out on the attachment, with some misgivings about what I could learn about primary school teaching after my previous years of school teaching experience, and concerned about lack of appropriate materials for classroom teachers under the requirement of the English syllabus for primary schools. I decided that the most useful thing would be to develop materials.*

In this regard, Lecturer B wrote:

> *When I first took the job in the Institute, I thought I had credentials for it. I held a Ph.D. with five years' experience in classroom research, specifically in the area of teachers' classroom behavior and the interrelationship between their behavior and second language development. I was familiar with classroom research methodologies··· I had experience teaching English in a*

university for a few years and I had also taught in secondary English classrooms before. I thought, therefore, that classroom teaching was nothing new to me both as a teacher and a researcher. However, after I took the position as an educator of primary English language teachers, my previous teaching experience and training did not seem to count. I was completely novice in a sense as I had no first-hand experience in primary schools. I was not familiar with the local educational system nor the overall socio-cultural context of Hong Kong··· All these factors had bothered me. That was the reason that I was longing for a chance to go into local schools, to experience as a teacher, rather than an observer/supervisor as I had been doing in the past three years, the lively and dynamic atmosphere of primary classrooms. I was longing to see if my beliefs and assumptions about language teaching and curriculum change were practically possible or feasible in my own classroom; and if I could be a good primary English teacher myself as I had been teaching and expecting my students to be.

Their different motives and needs led to the two different ways they arranged their attachment. Lecturer A, who had been in the Institute for quite a long time took the initiative of making her own arrangement. She wrote:

Rather than wait for a system to be imposed on me, I decided to be pro-active and arrange an attachment for myself. My first concern was that the Institute might set up a system which would include inviting "good " schools and "aided " schools to take staff on attachment. Pupils in these schools come from relatively privileged homes and many speak English as a second language. This could prevent us from developing a true picture of the demands made upon our pre-service and in-service primary school teachers. I think that it is important that the Institute reaches out to the ordinary government schools where most of our student teachers will go to teach··· My second concern was personal - the time factor, which is documented in literature in relation to working in schools (e.g. Galton 1989, and Scott and Burke 1995). I did not expect that any allowance would be made for the workload that we already carried, but that the attachment would be a hastily set-up addition. Subsequently, my suspicions were confirmed on both counts··· However, by then I had already made my arrangement. I borrowed the class of one of my

in-service teachers, who was taking a part-time and initial in-service education certificate course at the Institute. I had told a class I wanted to teach a lower streamed class in a nearby government school. A teacher in a local estate school offered me her class. It was agreed that I would take the 6C class one day a week for a double period, that is 70 minutes. In this way I could continue with my work at the Institute with the minimum of interruption as I was involved in much developmental and administrative work and carried a full teaching load. At the same time, the teacher could ensure that the pupils continued with specific lessons required by the school, as for example, the weekly dictation.

Lecturer B, on the other hand, did not take any initiatives for her own arrangement. Instead:

Initial contact with the school was made through the Institute, and I was assigned to a primary school in the New Territories. This was a PM school[1]*, operating from 12:45 to 6:10 during week days and 8:30 am to 12:15 pm every other Saturday. There were more than 800 pupils in 6 grades in the school, with an average of 37 in each class. About 30 teachers and fewer than ten administrative staff were responsible for its daily operation. The school enjoyed a reputation for good academic results and good discipline. The principal, who had some 30 years' experience in the local primary schools and 15 years' experience as principal, was famous for her innovations in teaching approaches and school management.*

Based on her experience in the school and understanding of the literature (Evans and Kong 1997), Lecturer A was convinced that teacher isolation was a big problem in teacher education.

The isolation results from the competitive atmosphere and *competitive nature of the schooling in Hong Kong. When principals compare examination results of one class with another, or one year with another year, or one school with another, teachers may not feel disposed to share ideas or materials with*

[1] In Hong Kong, the majority of primary schools operate only half a day due to a need to accommodate a large population of primary kids. Therefore, it is common practice for an AM school and a PM school to occupy the same premises but operate during different times of the day with different staff.

'rivals'. Such inter- and intra-school competitiveness can leave teachers isolated within their classroom.

This understanding led Lecturer A to the idea of establishing a collaborative relation with the partner teacher during attachment. She recorded how the collaboration worked:

> *Our working method was as follows. I outlined a lesson and, before attending her evening lectures at the Institute, the teacher came to my office to discuss it. We spent about 15 - 20 minutes discussing the lesson and together making improvements to it. The teacher would look at the lesson in terms of time. She made suggestions about which pupils might need help. She was able to help with preparation of materials, and she also gave ideas for creative work, especially use of drawings. When it was possible, we spent some time together after the lesson, talking about how we might do the same kind of lesson activities next time··· The teacher and I agreed on our working method. I would teach the class, but she would stay in the room, and would join in at the point where children began working on a task. In fact, we worked easily together, and happily interjected comments to help each other, or the pupils when we felt it necessary. The collaboration was set up to avoid my being "cast in the role of expert" (Blythman and Macleod 1990). I have done some collaborative teaching before so that was not new to me. It was new to the teacher; although English language teachers at this school do collaborate outside the classroom in sharing ideas and materials, they hardly do any sharing like this inside the class···*

In comparison with Lecturer A's attachment, there was no such collaboration between Lecturer B and her partner teacher. As she recorded her experience in this regard, she wrote:

> *During the attachment, what to teach and which exercise to cover in the textbook was basically decided by my partner teacher. She took good care of me, and was responsible for making arrangements for me to observe others' classes and to be observed by others as well. There was not much negotiation between us and I was willing to follow her arrangements. But soon, I found that was not easy to do. Take the survey lesson for example: I don't know why my partner teacher asked me to carry out the survey in this lesson. It was not related either in theme or linguistic form to any part of the unit··· The only reason might be that it was in the textbook. Despite my reservation, I did what*

I was asked to do because I wanted to show my respect and appreciation to my partner teacher. However, this compromised my teaching. I felt powerless in this case"[11]

It can be seen from the above that the two language educators decided to create their own roles for the attachment due to different motives and needs during different stages of their professional development. This led to their own choice of attachment type and resulted in different working relationships between them and their partner teachers. Lecturer A collaborated with the schoolteacher and benefited both of them; while Lecturer B experienced difficulties due to a lack of negotiation with her partner. The different roles they took is revealed even more clearly when looking at their actions in the actual classroom.

3. Actions in the Classroom

As mentioned above, Lecturer A decided to try out some new strategies in the classroom while Lecturer B tried to develop a better understanding of practical issues in the classroom. Their different agenda for the attachment prescribed, to certain extent, their different actions in the classroom. Lecturer A recorded what she did in the following way:

With the introduction of the Target Oriented Curriculum, teachers are supposed to cater more for individual differences, and pupils are supposed to take more responsibility for their own learning. However, it is unusual for teachers to provide more than one level of worksheet, and it is even more so for teachers to let pupils choose their own level of task. I did try an experiment, which for me was a first. Having prepared three levels of worksheets for one exercise, I gave the children a choice over which level of worksheet they wanted to try, having told them I would <u>not</u> be collecting marks. I did this partly to practice the structure, "Which one would you like? " as requested by the teacher. Using American advertising philosophy (!), i.e. nothing was designated as "Easy ", the pupils had the choice of "A difficult worksheet ", "A more difficult worksheet ", or "The most difficult worksheet ". Children whose English language ability I was aware of, did seem to take the worksheet which I would have expected to match their level of language skills. The children were able to do their work and to check it themselves. The more able pupils could get "help " from the less able pupils

who had more information on their worksheet. The question arises as to whether pupils would choose at a level to stretch them or at a level well within their ability and on the safe side. I thought that this might be an interesting area for a teacher to research.

My learning was on the nature of attachment. The teacher brought her knowledge of the children and context. I brought my years of teaching experience and the confidence to take risks. The following illustrates this point. The teacher had asked me to use the structure "I would like to ... " in some kind of writing exercise. I intended that the children design and write their own simple book of wishes. The teacher suggested I write up examples on the blackboard but I knew many children would merely copy the "right " answers. In the pre-planning stage I had told the teacher I would give them examples of my personal wishes and I chose things they couldn ' t wish for. But when we had set up the task, the teacher became nervous and suggested I put some of their examples on the blackboard. I desisted and soon the children were managing to write personal meaningful answers. For example, one child wrote of wishing to have a father. "I would like to have a father " will not be found in any of the textbooks but the sentence can be very meaningful to some children. In this way the teacher could see risk-taking in action, and the gratifying and creative results. However, I am only too aware that there were two adults in the classroom to help children say what was meaningful to them. In the normal Hong Kong classroom there may be 30-40 pupils with one teacher. Thus, time constraints may prevent teachers from finding out the capabilities of the children.

While being in the classroom enabled Lecturer A to try out her teaching strategies and confirm her assumptions about language teaching in Hong Kong, it rewarded Lecturer B with insights into the daily practice of classroom teachers. At the beginning of the attachment, Lecturer B concentrated on the content aspect of teaching. Soon after, what was going on during the lessons caught her attention. She recorded this in that journal she kept during the attachment:

After two lessons in the class, what to teach was no longer my primary concern. I still spent hours and hours preparing lesson plans and task-sheets. I

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pondered, for example, on how to relate the reading text to the task; what visual aids to use, puppets or real objects; where to put the illustrations to highlight the point, and how big the illustration should be etc. I was eager to know if the tasks would actually work after I had put in so much effort. However, problems, which emerged during the lessons, especially, in regard to the management of pair-work and group-work, became more serious than I had first anticipated, and thus, caught my attention.

A lesson she taught during the second week of her attachment illustrated this point:

The lesson was almost a disaster. I was confident beforehand because that was the best lesson plan I ' d ever come up within these two weeks, but I was proved wrong. The first part went well when we did a survey on kids ' ice-cream preferences. I asked the whole class about their preferences and kids simply raised their hands in response. One kid helped me to put the figures on the blackboard. Listening skills were practiced through this whole-class questioning and answering exercise. No comprehension problem was detected since pictures and words written on the blackboard served as linguistic support and clues for the procedure. Then I started another survey on kids ' film preferences with my own design of a group task based on the content in the textbook. First I distributed the work-sheet. Then I carefully divided the class into groups of four··· After that, I told kids to ask each other questions about their film preferences, and I asked them to take turns. Then the nightmare began! Kids started talking and doing things. They put ticks in each of the columns in the survey sheet. I didn ' t mind that they made noise, but the worst thing was they didn ' t seem to interact in English! I had put words and pictures in the work-sheet with the intention of assisting kids' understanding of the task procedures, but they were misused. Kids simply pointed to the pictures and ticked in the columns..

My partner teacher was in the class observing my lesson; she came to me after the lesson and offered some advice. She said I needed to do some drills and put sentence patterns on the blackboard for kids to refer to when interviewing each other. She also suggested that I should appoint a group leader, to lead the questioning and answering procedures of the survey. I had thought about

appointing a group leader when designing the task, but dismissed the idea. I believed if there was an appointed group leader, he/she might be the only one to ask questions, and the rest would only have the chance to answer. If I asked kids to take turns to ask each other questions, then everyone would have a chance to practice both productive and receptive skills. By doing so, the practice opportunity would be increased enormously. However, my good intentions were not born out. I was a bit embarrassed by the teacher ' s advice and suggestions. The embarrassment was not so much that I was not used to being criticized, nor that I was proved to be a less capable class teacher, as the fact that I would have given exactly the same advice and suggestions to my own students. I actually did and have been doing this so many times during student practicum!

Lack of ability to make effective use of practice opportunities, as set up in a plan, seems a common problem. When the new curriculum was first introduced, there was no previous procedural knowledge available for anyone. This is revealed in two episodes I observed in other teachers ' lessons. In one, a discussion was carried out in Chinese (Cantonese) when it was meant to be in English, and in the other, little was actually said in a 20-minute group-work when kids were supposed to interact with each other in finding out the owner of clothes. While implementing a new approach in the classroom, I, as a teacher, need to take a new role and develop new competencies to meet the challenge of change. This may involve "empower(ing) learners to take responsibility and to work cooperatively with each other " (Legutke and Thomas 1993:288). This may also involve teachers ' capacity to judge what and when support materials such as a word-list, or grammar is needed; when an intervention is appropriate; how to conduct negotiations with learners and how to provide feedback to learners. And above all, these factors have to be taken into account with an understanding of a particular educational system and societal demands (Legutke and Thomas 1993). Thanks to the attachment I had a chance to see all these working in the classroom.

In summary, Lecturer A found that materials could be adapted to implement new curriculum, but she had serious reservations about resourcing. Lecturer B developed a better

understanding of what was going on in the classroom, especially the development of management skills on pairwork/groupwork in the pedagogical context.

4. Implications and Reflection

The attachment has proved valuable for both of the lecturers despite the difference in the path each chose to take. The experiences have enabled them to up-date their professional knowledge. To a certain extent, the attachment is similar to a research inquiry for a true picture of reality. Going back to a school classroom could be taken as an attempt to validate the knowledge of the teacher educator through the means of triangulation. With a different source of data collection, that is, the classroom instead of academic books, and a different channel, namely, as classroom teacher instead of researcher, the two educators are actually making inquiries about their own beliefs and assumptions about teacher education. Knowledge obtained from such an inquiry enjoys more validity than that of their previous knowledge because the picture obtained in this case is more congruent with the reality in local schools.

However, the teacher educators came to see that attachment carried out alone might lead to some complacency. Lecturer A, for example, was pleased with what she had done in the classroom but felt that the attachment had not taught her anything new. This lack of self-development was brought home to her only through another, and perhaps more important form of triangulation – discussion with a colleague.

After the completion of the attachment, the two educators discussed their experiences and found they had approached the attachment in quite different ways. Post attachment professional sharing opened their eyes to their mutually different attitudes, and enriched the benefits of the attachment. Lecturer A was disconcerted to realize that her complacency had led her to fail to recognize the rich possibilities for research posed by attachment, however short the period. Lecturer B realized that she could have collaborated more with the classroom teacher.

Thus, it is possible that teacher educators might overlook important issues during the attachment due to their professional training and past experience. In other words, the attachment could be completed without bringing about any significant change in professional

attitudes. To go 'back' to school and maintain the same stance, either practical or theoretical, would be to fail to make full use of the experience for professional development. The professional discussion with colleagues after the attachment is as important as, or even more important than the attachment *per se* because it can open the mind to new ways of seeing. This has been documented in similar situations (e.g. Northfield 1996).

Doubtless it would be better if teacher educators had the opportunity to enjoy such professional attachment for a longer period of time, and with financial support. There are some though rare reports in the literature of the provision of time and money in, for example, England (Galton 1989), Australia (Loughran and Northfield 1996), Indonesia (Abimanyu 1999). The sad reality for many educators during these times of financial constraints is likely to be attachment on a shoe-string as in Hong Kong. Therefore, the experience of these two educators is likely to be of interest to others in the field of teacher education.

Each type of approach delineated above, whether arranged by the Institute, or staff themselves, whether in a two-week block, or one day a week for a period of two or three months, proved to have its own merits. The choice depends on the professional needs and goals of the staff concerned. The time factor, both examples being very short, did not seem to be of great importance in this case.

It is the belief of the authors of this paper that teacher education is a life long experience of learning and professional development. In order to go forward, sometimes, educators need to go back to the school classroom, where they can always find insights, inspiration and incentives. To make the most of such experience, the authors suggest that post-attachment discussion would also be a necessary component of attachment if the full richness of the experience is to be mined.

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